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The Accuracy of Students' Perceptions
of Themselves and Their Classroom

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Abstract

A student interview was administered to second grade students to determine how accurately they perceived their class environment. Three areas investigated were differential treatment of students by the teacher, the organization and management of the classroom, and students' self-rated ability. Ethnographic reports, teacher interviews and student outcome data were used to verify the students' responses. The students accurately reported differential teacher behavior and some of the organization and management of the classroom. Inconsistencies were found between the students' self-rated ability and the ability level of their reading groups.

The Accuracy of Students' Perceptions of Themselves and Their Classroom

In the attempt to understand classroom processes, knowledge of the perceptions of the student is of critical importance. Only through this knowledge can the impact of the teachers' behavior be understood. If we are to understand what produces behavioral changes in students then we must know to what stimuli the student is responding. This paper discusses a student interview in which second grade students were asked about a number of aspects of their reading class. The purpose of this interview was to provide insight into the students' perspective of their classroom and to identify areas where students tend to misperceive their environment.

These data were collected in connection with a study conducted in nine second grade reading classes in three schools. There were 23 reading groups. One class had one reading group, one class had four, two classes had two groups and the rest had three reading groups each. The reading groups were generally ability grouped. There were a total of 171 students in the study. Each reading class was observed at least ten times by a coder using the Stanford Research Institute coding system (Stallings and Kaskovitz 1974), and by an ethnographer. Four of these observations were also videotaped. In all three methods of observation, special attention was given to the reading groups within classes. In addition to these data, teacher and student interviews were conducted and achievement data, self-esteem data, and sociogram data on the students were collected.

The interview reported here followed Weinstein and Middlestadt (1979) in focusing on the child's view of the class organization. Because organization and management variables have been shown to be predictive

of student outcome, it should be of interest to determine how accurately the pupil perceives that part of the classroom environment. In addition, student perceptions of their own academic standing in relation to that of other students may be important. Our interview, combined with the other data, was designed to detect how students in different reading ability groups perceive their own standing in the class and whether these students differ in self-esteem and in academic level. Weinstein and Middlestadt studied student perception of the teachers' differential treatment of high and low achievers. They found that the students saw the teacher behaving differently toward high achievers and low achievers and that these differences tended to be on organization and management variables. This interview was also designed to detect these differences.

To answer these questions the interview was constructed to cover three areas; (1) classroom organization and management, (2) differential treatment of students by the teacher, and (3) pupil attitudes. See Appendix A for the interview form. In the organization and management section the students were asked questions about the number of reading groups, whether these groups differed in ability, what book they were reading, how they were placed in reading groups, how they got changed from one reading group to another, and how the teacher called on students. In the differential treatment section the students were asked about whether the teacher treated good readers and poor readers differently, how they reinforced good reading or correct responding, and whether the teacher was fair. Finally, in the attitude section the students were asked to rate their own reading ability and popularity. They were also asked about their favorite reading-related activities and how they felt about their teacher. In order to determine

the accuracy of the students' responses, the responses were compared to teacher interviews, ethnographer reports, and student outcome data.

Student Perception of Classroom Organization

On several questions the students were very accurate in reporting facts about their classroom. They knew how many reading groups there were, what reading group they were in, and the names of the reading groups. Other more abstract questions produced a variety of responses. When the students were asked about the differences between reading groups, 23.46% of the pupils mentioned reading ability of the students as a factor, 58.02% mentioned books, workbooks, and tasks as the difference. The rest mentioned structural details or did not know. It is interesting that the most salient feature to the teachers and researchers, (i.e., ability differences) is not salient to the students. However, since second graders are at a concrete operations stage, this finding is not surprising and the question arises whether the students are aware of the ability differences at all. To ascertain this, the students were asked directly which reading group had the best readers and which reading group had the poorest readers. Table 1 shows the breakdown for the students' responses according to reading group. Considering the "poor readers" question first, a χ^2 test failed to reject the hypothesis that there were any interaction effects suggesting that students in high, medium, and low groups do not respond differently to this question. It is obvious from the table that the vast majority of the students either responded correctly (54.97%) or said they don't know (36.84%). For the "best readers" question the χ^2 test for interaction effects was significant ($\chi^2_{61} = 17.21, p < .01$). Inspection of the table reveals that there was a tendency for medium and low students to name their own group

as the high group at a rate greater than predicted by the marginal totals. This is understandable since it is probably desirable to be in the high group. Again the majority of the students either responded correctly (64.91%) or didn't know (20.47%). But the "don't know" frequency is less than that for the "poor readers" question. This could be caused by a sympathetic reluctance to name the low group. The question remains whether or not the 35 to 45% of students who responded incorrectly or not at all really don't know about the ability differences, but it is clear that students are not especially sensitive to the issue. Other interview questions support this. When the students were asked, "How did you get in that [reading] group?" 33.9% mentioned ability as a reason and 23.4% did not respond. Finally, when they were asked, "What might happen that would make you get put in another group?" 56.73% mentioned ability as a cause for being moved to another group. For each of these questions there were no achievement differences between students who mentioned ability and those who did not.

Another series of questions concerned with classroom organization dealt with how the teacher calls on the students and how the teacher rewards correct responding or punishes incorrect responding. Questions of this type may be an important source of information for a classroom researcher since these are classroom characteristics that may well be related to student learning. The traditional method of obtaining this information is through observation and teacher interview. Interviewing the pupils is another possible source and has the advantage of possibly bringing in issues which are salient to the pupils. The pupils were asked how the teacher called on them both in reading and in comprehension

questions. The common responses to these questions were; randomly, sequentially, for discipline, and volunteering. Each teacher's strategy for calling on students was obtained from the ethnographic reports so that the accuracy of the students could be estimated. For "calling on" in reading group, 64% of the students agreed with the ethnographers on how their teacher called on them and the majority response within a class agreed perfectly with the ethnographers. Calling on randomly and sequentially were the most frequently used categories. When asked how the teacher calls on students for comprehension questions the same categories were mentioned, but the emphasis was different. In this case randomly and volunteering were the most frequent categories. 74% of the students agreed with the ethnographers. And in all but one class, the majority response agreed with the ethnographers. The one disagreement was dramatic, however, with only one pupil agreeing with the ethnographer. It is not clear why this disagreement occurred, but careful analysis of the videotapes of this teacher may help explain the discrepancy.

When the students were asked about the teacher responses to good reading there was again a high rate of agreement. 81% of the students responded that the teacher praised them which indeed was the major response of all the teachers, as reported by the classroom observers. On the other hand, when the pupils were asked what the teacher did when they came to a word they did not know, agreement was not as high. 98% of the students responded in one of two categories, "corrected" (46%) or "guided" (52%). The ethnographers agreed with these two categories but for three of the nine teachers the ethnographers disagreed with the students' majority response and in one case the disagreement was dramatic.

This same kind of disagreement occurred when the students were asked about the teacher's response to right and wrong answers to comprehension questions. For correct responses praise still received the most responses by the students, which agreed with the ethnographers' reports, but the students also responded that the teacher graded their responses, a category which was never mentioned by the ethnographers. This may point out a difference in emphasis between the students and the adult observers. For responses to wrong answers, the pupils responded with teacher "corrects," "guides," or "moves on to next student." The ethnographers agreed with this in general but for several specific teachers there was disagreement between the ethnographers and the majority student response.

It would appear from these data that interviewing the pupils regarding teacher strategies will produce different results than using classroom observers. There are at least three possible reasons for this; (1) the teacher actually does use different strategies at different times and the ethnographers were asked to give only the dominant strategy; the pupils on the other hand will respond with whichever one is most salient to them as individuals, (2) the pupils are with the teacher more and may actually have a better picture than the observers, and (3) the pupils may simply "tune in" at a different level. Two examples of this have been detected thus far. Ability differences are not especially salient to the students but are to the observers and grades are salient to the pupils but not to the ethnographers. Determining which of these factors or which combination of factors is influencing the children's responses will be a very difficult task.

Differential Treatment of Students by the Teacher

Several questions discussed in the first section bear indirectly on this issue but the students were asked directly whether or not the teacher treated good readers differently from poor readers and if so, how? Table 2 shows the breakdown of positive and negative responses by reading group and class. The Yes (57%) and No (43%) responses did not differ significantly ($\chi^2_1 = 3.35$) nor did the class by response interaction ($\chi^2_6 = 11.42$), indicating that the frequency of positive and negative responses did not differ across classes. Collapsing across classes there was a significant interaction effect for reading group by response ($\chi^2_2 = 6.61$, $p < .05$). Inspection of the table indicates that the low groups tended to say there were not any differences more than the other two groups. This could be caused by a desire on the part of the low pupils not to be separated from the rest of the class.

A more interesting question is what kinds of teacher treatment were identified by the students who said good readers and poor readers were treated differently. There were several identifiable categories which were, (1) treats good or poor readers better (shows a preference), (2) helps good or poor readers more, (3) rewards good reading and/or punishes poor reading, (4) gives more or less difficult work, and (5) gives different grades. The "rewards" category was clearly the most frequently used response (45%) which indicates that this is the level that is salient to most students. Interestingly, about half the pupils confused good versus poor reading with good versus bad behavior. One response was that the teacher did treat good and poor readers differently because "poor readers had to stand in the corner." This ties into the earlier point

that ability differences are not salient to many of these second graders; being good means "acting nice," not doing well academically. The second most-used category was helping good or poor readers more (26%). In this category most pupils said that the teacher helps the poor readers more (21%). The rest of the categories were infrequent. Eight percent of the pupils did indicate preferential treatment but these responses were not from any particular class and the ethnographers did not indicate that there was any noticable preferential treatment by any of the teachers. Except for the few students who mentioned preferential differences, the pupils' responses agreed with the ethnographers' statements on these issues indicating that the pupils had realistic perceptions of these aspects of the teacher's behavior. There were no significant achievement differences or self-esteem differences among the pupils responding in the different categories but because of the small number of students in most categories the null hypothesis should not be too readily accepted. There must be some individual difference variable which could explain why students attend to different teacher behaviors. More research is needed to address this issue.

Pupil Attitudes About Themselves

In the final part of the interview pupils were asked to rate their own ability level with respect to the rest of the class. The interviewer obtained this information by drawing a circle to represent each student in the class. These circles were arranged in a vertical line and were anchored by having the student name the top circle with the name of the best reader in the class and the bottom circle with the worst reader. They were then asked to point to the circle that represented their own standing in the class.

This information allowed comparison of the students' self-ranking and the actual ranking as reflected by reading group membership.

If the students accurately assess their ranking in the class this ranking should reflect the ability standing of their reading group, especially since the pupils are known to be aware of the differences among groups. In the high reading group 62% accurately rated themselves as highest readers in the class. 36% of the high readers, however, rated themselves in the middle of the class. 2% of the high readers rated themselves as poor readers. In the middle reading group 66% of the students rated themselves as being high and only 26% rated themselves in the middle of the class. This clearly indicates that many students are rating themselves higher than their group membership would dictate. 8% of the middle group rated themselves as low. In the low group 45% of the students rated themselves high and 45% rated themselves in the middle of the class; only 10% rated themselves as low.

One possible explanation for this finding would be that students with high academic self-esteem would tend to rate themselves as high regardless of their ability group and the reverse for the students with low academic-self-esteem. However, when academic self-esteem was analyzed no significant differences were found. An analysis in which achievement scores were compared for the nine groups of students was also carried out. However, the only significant effect was reading group within class [$F(2,14) = 14.19, p < .01$]. This pattern of data can be compared to the patterns of responses to the questions about which group has the best and worst readers shown in Table 1. The responses show a slight tendency for medium and low groups to name their group as the high group. But the effect

is not as great as when the question is put on an individual level. There are at least two possible explanations for this. First, the pupils are less tied to reality when asked to estimate their own standing. After all, even if one's group is medium or low one might still be the best reader in the group. Secondly, it has already been established that ability is probably not a salient factor for the pupils, leaving them free to base their self-rating on other, personal factors.

Kugle and Clements (1979) addressed a similar issue using data from this study. They were interested in whether the stability of self-esteem (as defined by item correlations between responses on a self-esteem instrument given on two occasions) differed for students who inaccurately judged their reading ability (high students rating themselves low and low students rating themselves high), and found that inaccurate students had significantly lower stability scores. This indicates that students with low stability of self-esteem may be misperceiving their class standing. Thus, there is some evidence that there is a relationship between instability of self-esteem and how the pupils rate themselves, but it is a complicated one.

Discussion

In reviewing the findings reported in this paper a number of important points stand out about how second graders view their classroom. First and foremost is their lack of emphasis on ability differences. Only a few more than half of the pupils responded appropriately to questions which directly addressed the issue of ability differences. And fewer than half volunteered ability differences as a basis of classroom organization. The conclusion that second graders aren't aware of these differences is not justified and it is possible that the students were intimidated by the

interviewer but this seems unlikely since the students were not really reluctant to talk to the interviewer about other things. The most likely explanation is that ability differences are not a highly salient factor for second graders. Being at a concrete operations stage of development they are more interested in the tangible aspects of the classroom environment. It may also be the case that good and bad behavior elicit a greater reaction from the teacher than good and poor reading. This would explain why many of the students confused these two issues when talking about differential teacher behavior.

A related second point is that there is a certain amount of misperception regarding the ability differences they do report. When asked to identify the reading groups with the best and worst readers there was a small tendency to overestimate their own group. And when this question was placed on an individual level there was decided overestimation of the students' own ability. There was also a good deal of disagreement between the students and ethnographers and among the students concerning the teacher's strategy in calling on students and reacting to right and wrong responses. It is likely that individual difference variables are the cause of this variance. This study failed to find relationships between self-esteem or achievement and the students' responses. The only finding was that the individuals' overestimation of their reading ability was correlated to instability of self-esteem.

When the students were asked about the teacher's differential treatment of high and low achievers, their responses were similar to those of the students in the Weinstein and Middlestadt study. There was definitely a picture of a perceived different environment for the good readers from

that of the poor readers. Many of the differences mentioned were similar to those that Weinstein and Middlestadt found such as; "the good readers get to do more fun things," "the bad readers get easier materials," "the teacher helps the low pupils more," etc. Weinstein and Middlestadt reported that in their study only a few pupils focused on praise and/or punishment differences in teacher behavior, whereas in this study 45% of the students mentioned these factors. The implication of these students' responses is that good readers will get a lot of praise and diversity of tasks, whereas the poor readers will get much less praise and will do more repetitious tasks. It must be remembered, however, that this study dealt only with second graders and the Weinstein and Middlestadt study dealt with grades one through six.

Interviewing students provides useful input into describing the classroom environment by contributing to our understanding of the saliency of various features of that environment to its most important occupants, the students. However, as shown here, more needs to be known about student characteristics that are related to how they respond to interview questions. As an accurate source of information about aspects of the classroom environment, student interviews must be viewed with caution precisely because of their diverse perspectives.

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Table 1

Which group has the best readers

		Reading Group			Total
		High	Medium	Low	
Response	High	49 (69.01)*	30 (63.83)	32 (60.38)	111 (64.91)
	Medium	4 (5.63)	9 (19.15)	1 (1.89)	14 (8.19)
	Low	3 (4.23)	1 (2.13)	7 (13.21)	11 (6.43)
	Don't Know	15 (21.13)	7 (14.89)	13 (24.53)	35 (20.47)
Total		71 (41.52)	47 (27.49)	53 (30.99)	171

Which group has the poorest readers

		Reading Group			Total
		High	Medium	Low	
Response	High	1 (1.41)	1 (2.13)	3 (5.66)	5 (2.92)
	Medium	5 (7.04)	3 (6.38)	1 (1.89)	9 (5.26)
	Low	43 (60.56)	26 (55.32)	25 (47.17)	94 (54.97)
	Don't Know	22 (30.99)	17 (36.17)	24 (45.28)	63 (36.84)
Total		71 (41.52)	47 (27.49)	53 (30.99)	171

* Percent of column total.

Table 2

Does the teacher treat good readers
different from poor readers?

		YES			NO		
		High	Medium	Low	High	Medium	Low
1		4	2	2	3	7	3
2		10	+	1	3	+	2
3		6	+	11	1	+	7
4		9	3	2	3	5	1
Class	5	1	11	1	2	4	7
	6	5	4	0	3	2	3
	7	2	13	2	5	0	0
*	8	6	+	3	5	+	7
TOTAL		43	33	22	26	18	30

* Class nine was left out because there were no
reading groups.

+ No middle group in this class.

Appendix A

1. Age _____
2. School _____
3. Who is your homeroom teacher?
4. What does your father do?
5. What does your mother do?
6. How many brothers and sisters do you have? Are you the oldest?
7. Name of child _____
8. Sex _____
9. Name of interviewer _____
10. Date _____
11. Ethnicity _____

Organization and Management

12. How many reading groups are there?
13. How are they different from each other?
14. Which has best, worst readers? (Names of groups)
15. What reading group are you in now? (Name)
16. How did you get in that group?
17. Have you been in any other reading group? Name?
18. How did you get into that group?
19. What might happen that would make you get put in another group?
20. What group would you most like to be in? Why?
21. What is the name of the book you are reading now? Is it easy or hard for you?

22. What's your favorite reading group activity? Reading aloud? Workbook? Questions about story? Do you like? Why?
23. When you're working with teacher reading aloud, how do you get called on? Why? (probe)
24. In reading aloud is teacher fair in calling on students to read? Why?
25. What does the teacher say or do when someone comes to a word they don't know?
26. What does the teacher do or say when a person reads well?
27. When the teacher is asking questions about the story, how does she call on you? Does everybody get a change to answer?
28. What does teacher do when you make a mistake?
29. What does teacher do when you give the right answer?

Highest

Class

30. Rate best, worst readers, self (names) on this scale (whole class) and in reading group. (Interviewer draw in as many circles as there are students in reading group.) How can you tell?

31. Does the teacher treat the good readers different from the bad readers? if yes, how?

32. ^aDo you think the teacher helps you learn to read? ^bWhat does the teacher do to help you learn to read? ^cIf you were a teacher, what would you do to help students learn to read? ^dWould you teach like your teacher teaches?

33. Did you learn as much this year as you expected to?

34. Did you read before you came to school? When did you learn to read?

35. Do you read at home?

36. What kinds of things do you read?

37. Does anybody ever read to you at home? Who? How often? Do you ever read to anybody?

38. Does anybody at home read newspapers, magazines, and books. Which ones?

39. Do your parents ever ask you about what goes on in school?

Lowest